

# Tacitus, Tiberius, and Augustus

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*'And so, what is Leninism?'*

(J. V. Stalin, *The foundations of Leninism* 1939 (1924))

In the early years of Tiberius' principate, after violence in the theatre, the senate met to discuss whether or not praetors should be able to whip actors. Tiberius himself was present in the senate, but, says Tacitus, he remained silent. Tacitus nevertheless concludes the episode by noting that it was decided that actors should not be whipped, because the Divine Augustus had once said that actors were immune from beatings, and Tiberius was understood not to wish to contradict him.

Augustus' words were powerful. Even after his death, those things which Augustus had said or done continued to be influential. How could they not have been? Augustus was the 'refounder' of Rome, the chief exemplar in the state, the *pater patriae*, the first among equals. But Tacitus' treatment of this incident is striking. Tiberius was silent, yet the final decision was understood by Tacitus to be a result of his desire not to depart from Augustus' words. The implication is that it was because the senate knew Tiberius' partiality for following Augustus that the discussion ended as it did.

Tacitus records more than fifteen incidents like the one above which he explains in terms of Tiberius' deference towards the deeds and words of Augustus. These include deferring to Augustus in legal and constitutional matters, in the daily business of the senate, and in the conduct of the family. Most famously, Tiberius responded to a request from a deputation from Further Spain that they be allowed to erect a shrine to Tiberius and Livia by citing the maxim that, in general, he was observing the deeds and words of Augustus as though they were a law.

Tiberius' deference to the 'deeds and words of Augustus' needs to be examined. Is it, as some have suggested, simply the case that Tiberius was 'slavishly' or 'obsequiously' devoted to Augustus, or can we find another explanation?

## Stalin and Leninism?

In a series of lectures delivered at Sverdlov University, Moscow, in 1924, shortly after Lenin's death, Stalin attempted to explain 'Leninism'. He examined Lenin's attitudes on matters of current general interest – the 'peasant question', strategy and tactics, the party – and he quoted Lenin (his sayings, his writings) all the time. The 'Leninism' which emerged from Stalin's work was, in many respects, more coherently and systematically expounded than Lenin's own writing. In fact, it is doubtful whether Lenin would have thought of himself in these terms at all – a Marxist, yes, but a 'Leninist', what would that have meant to Lenin?

Undoubtedly some systematization of Lenin's ideas was required if the Party and movement he founded were to be able to continue after his death. Some of Lenin's statements were well-known, others less so, some were well-understood, others open to interpretation. The words of Lenin carried tremendous weight. Undoubtedly also, claiming to follow Lenin and adhere to Leninism were important badges of legitimacy and authority. But it was the ability to set himself up as the 'interpreter' of Lenin which gave Stalin the greatest power within the Party.

The point of all this is not to advocate crude comparisons between Lenin and Stalin, Augustus and Tiberius, but rather to

use this example as a means of asking questions about our Tacitean material. What is going on when Tiberius continually refers to Augustus?

## Tiberius and Augustus

Tiberius' devotion to Augustus is neither as all-absorbing nor as binding as might at first appear. To return to the famous instance concerning the deputation from Further Spain who wanted to make a shrine to Tiberius, here he actually *departs* from Augustan precedent. He cites the maxim (that he is observing Augustus' deeds and words as though they were a law) as one that he will generally observe, but goes on to explain why it need not be observed in this instance. Clearly, if at times there were things which Tiberius did not want to do, he did not consider himself bound to do them by Augustan precedent.

Likewise, whilst Augustus' words carried the day in the senate's discussion about the whipping of actors, it is worth bearing in mind that this is not how the discussion started. It started with a proposal that actors *should* be whipped. Evidently, therefore, Augustus' words were not taken to be uncontradictable by everyone at all times. The very fact that Tacitus records that there was a discussion at all suggests that some people supported the proposal, whilst others opposed it. So, although the words of Augustus were important and persuasive, they did not preclude all discussion.

Moreover, what the 'deeds and words of Augustus' meant was not always clear. When M. Hortensius Hortalus claimed that Augustus' gift of a million sesterces had encouraged him to marry and bear children, and argued on the basis of this that he should be given some financial support by Tiberius in order to maintain them, Tiberius told him that he had misunderstood what Augustus intended. The Divine Augustus had given Hortalus money but without being asked to do so and without promising that there would be more. Augustus' 'deeds and words' could be slippery things, sometimes binding, at other times open to (re)interpretation by the new *princeps*.

And Tiberius was not the only one to offer interpretations of Augustus' 'deeds and words'. In Hortalus' case just cited, Hortalus had claimed to know what Augustus had intended and what his 'deeds and words' had meant. Others did the same, particularly those who, like Tiberius, had first-hand experience of how Augustus had done things. When he stood before Tiberius, accused of writing about Brutus and Cassius as 'the last of the Romans', the historian Cremutius Cordus reminded Tiberius that Augustus had tolerated Livy's writing and had even called him 'the Pompeian'. Early on Sallustius Crispus explained to Tiberius (through Livia, Tiberius' mother, who later married Augustus) how the court should be run, based upon his experience under Augustus. Livia herself must have had a formidable knowledge of Augustus' 'deeds and words' – perhaps she also tried to tell Tiberius how they should be understood.

Tiberius was surrounded by people like this all the time, people whose experiences under Augustus had led them to have expectations about how the principate functioned, about what Augustus' 'deeds and words' might mean. Little wonder then that he should be so keen to assert his own right to 'interpret Augustus' and to be the true follower of his deeds and words. Such a practice was not a case of being slavish and obsequious,

it was a means of exercising some authority and control over the Augustan past and over the expectations that others had of Augustus' successor. Proclaiming his deference to Augustus' deeds and words may often have gone hand in hand with explaining what those deeds and words meant.

### **Tacitus, Tiberius, and Augustus**

But we need to be cautious. Tiberius' deference to Augustus' deeds and words nowhere else receives the same extensive treatment and attention that it has in Tacitus. Tacitus seems fascinated with the idea, but there is very little contemporary evidence which can be used to support Tacitus' picture of Tiberius continually deferring to Augustus in all things. This is not to say that it did not happen, and indeed, as we've seen, there were very good reasons for Tiberius to insist on being Augustus' 'continuator', but Tacitus' fascination with these instances is worth bearing in mind. It actually tells us as much about Tacitus as it tells us about Tiberius.

It tells us about Tacitus' view of the Augustan achievement. From his vantage point in A.D. 110, Tacitus considered the Augustan 'system' (whatever that means!) to be settled and finalized by A.D. 14. We need only look at the opening of the *Annals* (1.1–10) to see that Tacitus thought that Augustus had set up a new and fully operational principate. Tiberius' key job, then, would be to continue to make this new system work. Tacitus saw this happening every time he saw Tiberius doing or saying the things that Augustus had done or said. Tacitus' view of Tiberius' character also supported his interpretation of Tiberius' deference to Augustus. Dour, inscrutable, conservative, Tiberius hardly appears as a dynamic thinker in Tacitus' account. Essentially stodgy, Tiberius makes the perfect 'continuator' of Augustus' achievements, one who would not detract from Augustus' charismatic legacy by rivalling it himself. So, crudely, Tiberius continued to defer to Augustus because, in Tacitus' view, that's just the kind of unimaginative man he was. But was he...?

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